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AUTHOR Walker, Helen L.
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ABSTRACT

Efforts by a writing specialist at the University of Maine at Presque Isle to implement a learning center there were based on methodologies adapted from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." In keeping with Freire's call and decoding stages, the specialist began meeting with the necessary personnel to create guidelines and split the project into parts. The specialist found local people to be: (1) eager to welcome strangers; (2) hard-working and land-focused; (3) fundamentalist Christian; (4) somewhat racist toward Franco-Americans and American Indians; and (5) supportive of education as a means to a better life. Upon reflection, the writing specialist's teaching style was seen as authoritarian and an internal struggle for radical change began. Freshman in a composition class were found to be unaccustomed to dialogue. The class was transformed by being divided into small peer discussion groups which encouraged dialogue. A learning center with a staff of five was instituted at the university. Peer tutors were trained and a democratically-based methodology was established. More work needs to be done to determine contradictions between what is being done and what should be done. (SG)

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"Unfinished Story" by Dr. Helen L. Walker, University of Maine at Presque Isle: Paper presented at CCCC, Boston, March 1991

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"Unfinished Story" by Dr. Helen L. Walker, University of Maine at Presque Isle: Paper presented at CCCC, Boston, March 1991

Last May, I proposed to myself and then to 4 C's to document the creation of the new learning center at the U. of ME at PI, using Freirean methodology, especially as they coincided with the aims of democratization of education as defined by the 1987 English Coalition Conference Report. I had just signed a contract to be the "Writing Specialist" at the univeristy and was to move from Illinois to Maine and begin work in August. I was sure that chronicling the creation process would be fascinating, no matter what happened.

The proposal was rashly conceived. First, I was <u>not</u> hired as the LC director, rather as professor and the Writing Specialist who would have as half of her duties LC consulting and implementation along with across-campus programs. Second, I had never even <u>met</u> the LC director to run this by her; as a matter of fact, she wasn't even hired until June, the time I discovered that her degrees were from Brandeis and Harvard. So. Tell me what were the chances of my boss desiring to conduct a revolution against elitist educational systems? Third, I had never had a college administration job in my life. Fourth, I have known for a long time I have absolutely no political "savvy." And fifth, I had not talked to <u>one</u> of the 1500 UMPI students, to know if they weren't maybe <u>already</u> liberated, weren't already what Ira Shor

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terms "critically literate" (24).

So. I have confessed to my rash and risky beginnings in order to let you know the viewpoint from which you are getting my report. I am guessing most of you are not so naive, do have administrative experience and do know the political inner workings of your particular institution. You are on the "inside." Perhaps, then, you may discover some insights for yourself from hearing about my quite different kind of journey; perhaps, also, participating in my reflection process may encourage your own.

Part I Step I, Maine:

When I arrived in Presque Isle six weeks before school started, I proceeded on my own to do what I could do with beginning Freire's Steps for Investigation, which I had sifted down from pages 102-116 of Pedagogy... until I arrived at a summary whose application seemed appropriate for our LC creation project. I began some of the work of Freire's Call Stage. I met informally with "the people" in this new place to communicate that the LC staff would look at the "present reality" in dialogue with "the people," and "instead of following predetermined plans, [we would] together create the guidelines for our action and would somehow [be] reborn in new knowledge and new action" (183). I didn't use these words, of course. I also began Decoding Stage work.

I split up the "new area" by analyzing the parts and so decoding this "enormous, unique, living 'code' to be deciphered"( ). I watched, dialogued with people I would be working with, heard history, got my bearings, tutored a couple of students, talked to "local" people in grocery stores and restaurants, searching for their attitudes toward the university and toward education, for biases and authoritarian mindsets; and I developed the beginnings of a picture of this new area:

1. People were eager to make strangers feel welcome to Aroostook Country. They were proud of being at the "edge of the world." Presque Isleans were also proud of being the "hub" of Northern Aroostook County.

2. People were hard working and land-focussed, as opposed to education-focussed: potatoes, broccoli, lumber. To show the importance of potatoes to the economy and the relationship of the economy to education, each year the traditional Potato Harvest Break for High School students starts in the middle of September and goes on into October. With very little hand harvesting left, talk is that the break will be discontinued in favor of school, but noone seems to really think so. The break is tradition.

3. The area is a fundamentalist Christian "Bible Belt" with attitudes that seem associated with this fact:

A) female submission to the authority of males and other "god-figure representatives" like leaders in the church or other organizations

B) duty--to God and country and military and other American institutions

C) patient fatalism (This attitude may arise from a dependence on the will of the weather as well, especially the long and very snowy winters).

4. Racist attitudes: pockets of Franco-Americans and American Indians are the main targets of prejudice since there are very few Blacks in the area).

5. Education seemed to be looked at as just possibly a way to a better life: a cautious but hopeful attitude in the better than 50% nontraditional enrollment and the large numbers of first-generation college students.

Step II.

Since I couldn't do much more with studying the "present reality" without a team of assistants as well as the leader, I went to my own reflection process on my own educational/cultural background. Freire makes it clear that the transforming learning process which changes an oppressed person into a critical thinker "who can make history" instead of being submerged in it must start

from reflecting on one's place in his/her present reality. Critical thinking starts from "perceiving the root causes of one's place in society," states Nina Wallerstein (34). So, what has been my situation in society, specifically within the educational system? Freirean theory rests on the assumption that the present educational system is oppressive and authoritarian-based and so must be revolutionized. Was my education oppressive and authoritarian-based? His theory also insists that "the leaders [for change in education] must realize their own conviction of the necessity for struggle" (Freire 54). Was I convicted? I began to reflect.

My instruction was what Shor earmarks as the standard "authoritarian approach: memorization, mechanical testing; teacher-talk and student silence, abstract subjects remote from student interest, standardized syllabi...(16). It was decidedly not what Freire states is necessary for developing critical consciousness: interactive participation, mutual respect, and dialogue. This was true all the way through public school and my undergraduate work.

I could see this picture clearly, but, still, REVOLUTION? Such a strong word. Revolutionary change in education means overthrowing or going against the present educational structure, the same

structure that I had been successful in and therefore had rewarded me. Isn't that the way with most of us here in this room? Aren't we here because we were the cream that rose to the top? Were patted and petted and praised? Why would we want to consider turning against that which fed our egos with praise? Didn't the system work for us? Didn't we indeed "learn" from it? Or so what if we actually learned despite it? We did learn; and, if it were good enough to get us here to 4 C's, college or high school educators ourselves, then how could we be expected to see it as so oppressive as to radically oppose it?

I read more. Everyone was agreeing that our U.S. educational system has serious problems. The word that kept coming up was "alienation." Students were alienated from their teachers, from their schooling, from learning. Shor explained the reason for this: "Student resistance to intellectual life is socially produced by inequality and the authoritarian pedagogy in school" (13).

Yet, if everyone were agreeing that change should occur, why didn't it just happen? Companies which produce rotten products go bankrupt or get reassigned or rearranged. Why were parents continuing to pay for inferior services? THings just couldn't be so bad, or everyone would have already revolted. Willard

Callendar, in his article "Joy of Learning," states that "the public school system seems to be shut-down proof, regardless of the success or failure of the students." One reason he gave was that it "carries within itself the allegorical symbolism of the American Dream," showing "qualities of sacredness.... with religious ritual [as] its essence...bells, ceremonies, graduation rituals,...knowledge-bearing certified teacher-priests and priestesses to teach this knowledge to subjected novitiate-students" (18). I remembered the rituals. I also recalled, the feeling of my moving through school days as part of a stream of continuing American history begun by rows of desks ofPuritan school children flowing into rows of desks of Little House on the Prairie children flowing into rows of desks of me and my classmates, all moving along "The American Way."

I began to see that it wasn't just the praise and ego-stroking that was making it hard for me to see a need for radical change: it was also the depth of the stream and the strength of the current that I was submerged in.

Education is <u>not</u> neutral: Friere makes this clear. It either "functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, <u>or</u> it becomes

'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Shaull 15).

So a choice must be made. If, as we interact with the beauacracy outside our classroom, if in our hearts we hold "It," the present educational system, as ultimately sacred and so superior, it will dominate us. Its methods will dominate in our learning centers and classrooms. We cannot serve two gods, so to speak. As Freire uses Alvaro Pinto to explain, Our consciousness, our world view, our "first love" (that which we serve) becomes our true method (56). We will still be a part of the structure of domination if we do not revolt against it.

My own past and my reading convinced me that I must struggle for radical change--unless the change had already occurred in Presque Isle, Maine. I talked with my three children about their 3rd grade, 6th grade, and 10th grade school experiences--and found classic authoritarian instruction. My son had a home-ec segment in which he "learned" to sew on buttons by filling in instructions on illustrated dittos. There was no needle or thread or button involved. He said to me one afternoon, "Today I was in English and doing work. I felt like I was going to drop my pencil slowly out of my fingers and my head was going to sink

slowly down on the desk and then I would go to sleep." It seemed like he meant to add "forever."

The pile of fill-in-the-blank dittos my third grader completed in a week was exhausting to look at. Taryn's description of her sophomore pyschology class summarizes what I learned of her high school instruction: we "memorize terms for tests, but the teacher is nice," she said.

I started my teaching. My freshmen composition and writing about literature students did not want to have dialogues in class. Discussions were forced and so not dialogue at all. A student told me why after class one day. "If it was about facts out of text books, they would. But not about opinions .... We have always listened to teacher's opinions (Dumont interview). I tried a different approach after that. I gave them 3 of my non-fact questions about the novel of the week and broke them up into peer groups. The class was transformed. Faces were screwed up and voices grew heated, defending opinions. There was laughter, derision, admiration over things the <u>characters</u> had done. They were <u>into dialogue</u>. Why? They felt equality among the participants. The feelings of alienation between a "representative of the [authoritarian] academic community and students" was not a part of the situation because the teacher was

not in the dialogue. Elsasser and Steiner state it clearly: "True communication demands equality between speakers" (47). I knew they were equal to me, I think. They didn't know it, though.

So. I studied authoritarianism and found it to be the active and dynamic sytem for both the educational environment I had moved to and would be working in and also for my own educational background. I knew I had to break with it. I was ready to go forward. As Shor put it, "Once we accept education's role as challenging inequality...rather than as socializing students into the status quo, we have a foundation needed to invent practical methods" (15).

PART II: PROMOTING DEMOCRACY BY PRACTICING IT

Democracy: "[1] a location where the supreme power is vested in the people and is exercised by them and [2] where there is the absence of hereditary and arbitrary class distinctions and privileges" (Websters 9th).

How does this definition translate itself directly into the attitude of a learning center methodology? Our learning center "people" would be a director with a reading pedagogy background, a writing specialist, a grant director, an administrative assistant, a coordinator/counsellor for non-traditional students,

student tutors, and student clients. Since power is vested in and exercised among equals, this translates into Freirean dialogue among all of us as equals, which would result in decision making and task deliniation. Power would reside with the doer(s) of each particular task. Class distinction in a learning center would most likely be based on educational status/level or job title. The absence of class distinction would translate into mutual respect and therefore make true dialogue possible.

OUR WORK TOGETHER:

Our staff of 5 began our work together the end of August. Let me note here a crucial point. Our large 5-year Title III grant gives our staff financial autonomy during our planning period; the only external directives come from the grant itself, and the width of latitude in the grant also gives us the autonomy necessary to create the educational activity any of us could want to create. Therefore, we have had the option to conduct whatever method for our creation process we would choose, except of course for our own internal limitations. We began our work in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a desire for dialogue among equals to find power bases from which each could operate. We became aware quickly of our different areas of expertise that

each of us brought to our team: those who knew the territory had been waiting for those who knew the theory. We needed each other; it was easy to feel mutual respect.

So, what were some of our accomplishments?

1) After opening our doors for tutoring on October 1, by December 8, we had 26 tutors who held 348 sessions.

2) We developed successful methodology, I think, for tutor training.

3) We set up a data base so that our extensive peer tutor log information can be entered and used in whatever way would help facilitate across-campus communication and also research.

4. We designed and are now ready to install the first computer-assisted writing classroom on campus, to be taught in in the Fall.

5. We completely changed the theory and methodology of the Reading and Writing Basic Studies courses and are teaching all sections in the new way.

6. We conducted presentations, consultations and workshops for numerous faculty across the disciplines relating to their particular course material.

7. We accepted the job of being in charge of the entire placement enterprise starting this summer, changing from paper

-and-pencil writing, reading and math multiple choice exams to computer-adaptive reading and math tests and to an essay writing exam.

8. This semester, we are piloting a students-at-risk program involving counselling and tutoring for probationary students.

We planned most of these things through informal group dialogue, often 2 starting something, developing more, sharing some of it orally, memos to the rest going out for more feedback (sometimes getting some, sometimes not) until the time came when the director decided something. Then, the message got around to everyone as to what it was that was happening, and we worked out how to implement it.

--So. Where are we now, in what I proposed would be an attempt at a Freirean/democratic creation process? Eight months after I began my part in this creation process and 6 months after we opened our doors to students. I of course would not pick this time, halfway through our second semester, to answer this question. But here I am with this rashly conceived job to do. And interestingly enough, the timing of my answer and the discussion it is causing among us could end up being good timing for the 5 of us in our reflection process. Here goes.

We have extended ourselves in many directions. We are not sure what we are extending from. As a group we are not sure. And from the very beginning we have espoused that we are a democracy. That means we, as a group, should be sure of what the core of us is. We should have been sure of that first, before any "Educational Action" was taken. In other words, we, as a group, have not collectively developed and so come to understand what is our "PROGRAM CONTENT OF THE EDUCATIONAL ACTION" (Freire #). But, what is wrong with this if we have been doing all these things for our students? It is Freire's contention, and mine, that the way we come to act, or the way we learn what to do, determines the success of the act. If the decisions as to what to do are not arrived at democratically by the group who is to act, then the activity is not democratic education. Back to Pinto: the method is the act. We cannot be a learning center teaching democracy unless we are founded on democratic principles. And this is not a halfway thing. Back to Freire: "Education is not neutral." It is either serving authoritarianism or it is serving democracy.

What are the reasons why we are where we are?

1) We did not follow something akin to Freire's Steps for Investigation to begin our process together. I started them

alone, but that is not Freire's point. It is to be that group which will be the group taking action which goes through the process together.

Why didn't we? One reason is that it seemed like there wasn't time, or wouldn't have been if we had tried. We wanted to produce, to show ourselves successful. Perhaps a reason why we wanted this production is the most revealing. I don't think we have become revolutionaries. Not yet, at least. We are still in the present educational system. We want it to love us--we want to be indispensable to it. We have, in reality, been driven by the need to "serve the bureacracy rather that the need to serve the students" ( ). We must instead love our own mission--to teach democracy using democractic principles in a democratic educational system. That really means we must reject that other love because we see it for what it is, antithetical to what we know is true learning. We must create ourselves through a revolutionary process which has made a conscious break from that which is <u>not</u> democracy. Only then can we become co-creators with students of a revolutionary process of educaton where, through dialogue between equals, students and teachers, students and students all "co-intent on coming to know [reality] critically, discover themselves as its permanent recreators" (Freire 56).

The question now is what is our next step? We can certainly continue on as we have been. Things are certainly not that bad. The administration is not only pleased but I think thrilled with us.

It was primarily through writing this paper that I have come to understand just where we have come and also, then, what had been causing my increasing personal stress about my part in our group. I have discovered the absence of the core necessary for me to function like I know I must (or at least hope I must). Since we are not living the process, we need to begin doing that. We need to go back to Freire's Steps for Investigation listed in the handout: 1) make clear the reasons for the investigation and how it is to be carried out; split up the "unique, living area to be deciphered" into parts and analyze the dimensions, to be able to see them and also see how the various parts interact; make reports on what is found on each part; read each others' reports to reconsider our own previous considerations; see the need for new directions for analysis and then new reports; divide and reintegrate the whole until the center of contradictions between what is and what should be becomes located. The contradictions will then indicate tasks needed to be done. Plans of

implementation, then, would be prepared by the specialist for that kind of task as suggestions to be taken to the group to be studied for connections to other plans, etc. and approval. Implementation and then evaluation would begin.

We can do this this summer. After this present year of accumulating invaluable information to analyze, we can take the time and the effort to investigate. We have talked about doing this because we are all seeing and feeling contradictions. If we do, we will be using the method we hope to teach and so it will become our consciousness. I can report further on this after that happens.

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from pages 102-116 of PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED)

"a process of search, of knowledge, and thus of creation"

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The Steps:

I. THE CALL

A. Meet informally with a significant number of persons to talk about the "reasons for the investigation, how it is to be carried out, and to what use it will be put," and the absolute necessity for a "relation of mutual understanding and trust."

B. Call for volunteers to serve as assistants who will gather data about the background of the area being investigated.

II. THE DECODING STAGE

A. The critical aim of each meeting in this stage is to regard the area as a totality ("unique, enormous, living 'code' to be deciphered") and then to split the totality up by analyzing the partial dimensions and so decoding the whole and so coming to understand who the various parts of the whole interact.

Methods of analysis:

1. observe certain "moments" of the life of the area. Record (language used, work behavior, the way thought is constructed, relationships between people). It is essential to observe the area under varying circumstances.

2. after each observation, a brief report should be drawn up to be discussed by the entire team, in order to evaluate the findings.

III. THE EVALUATION STAGE

reports are read which will relate how each person on the team perceived or felt the various occurrences. Each team member then "re-considers" through the "considerations" of others their own previous consideration. This dialogue evokes need for new directions for analysis, following which a new critical meeting will be held for the new reports. The more the team divides and reintegrates the whole, the more closely they approach the center of the contradictions between what is and what should be, inherent in the area under investigation.

IV. LOCATING CONTRADICTIONS WHICH WILL THEN BECOME THE "PROGRAM CONTENT OF THE EDUCATIONAL ACTION"
(note: The whole group must become aware of these contradictions which will then indicate tasks, the "educational action")

V. STUDY OF ALL FINDINGS

1. Classify the contradictions into themes, with a specialist in charge of each. The specialists would present a plan for implementing which would break down and sequence tasks.

2. Other specialists would make suggestions for each plan.

3. Create the overall plan of implementation.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

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